



The Color of Prison

Shared Legacies in Walter Mosley's The Man in My Basement and Jonathan Lethem's The Fortress of Solitude

Sharma, Devika

Published in:
Callaloo

Publication date:
2014

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Sharma, D. (2014). The Color of Prison: Shared Legacies in Walter Mosley's The Man in My Basement and Jonathan Lethem's The Fortress of Solitude. *Callaloo*, 37(3), 662.

THE COLOR OF PRISON

Shared Legacies in Walter Mosley's *The Man in My Basement* and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*

by Devika Sharma

No general consensus seems to exist on the precise meaning of *neo-slave narrative*. On the one hand, the term is applied—often mockingly so—to an African American writer's description of his or her successful fight against discrimination, ghettoization, and poverty *en route* to becoming a full member of the respectable middle class. It is in this sense that John Edgar Wideman used the term when characterizing the autobiographies of Oprah Winfrey and O. J. Simpson. These seemed to Wideman cliché-ridden up-from-the-depths biographies, “merely repeating one of the master plots Americans have found acceptable for black lives” (xxix). On the other hand, the term is also frequently invoked when characterizing literary works of fiction dealing thematically with the historical institution of slavery in America, or comparing in one way or another contemporary African American lives to life in slavery. It is in this more inclusive and subtle sense that a novel such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is often described as a neo-slave narrative.¹ However, Brian Jarvis uses the term altogether differently in his book *Cruel and Unusual: Punishment and US Culture*, when describing narratives written by African American inmates as a neo-slave literature of sorts. Here Jarvis points to prison narratives written by authors and activists such as Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson, in which the prison itself figures as a kind of slavery. For instance Cleaver, in his 1968 classic *Soul on Ice*, described prison as “a continuation of slavery on a higher plane” (qtd. in Jarvis 107).

From these various suggestions, however different they are, we may conclude that the term *neo-slave narrative* designates a literature concerned with isolation and confinement as racialized experiences in contemporary American society. More precisely, neo-slave literature seems to be a literature exploring at least one of two cultural templates for imagining and understanding imprisonment central also to the historical slave narratives. According to the first of these templates, racial markers such as skin color themselves amount to a form of prison. Thus, racial “passing” may figure as a strategy to escape the prison of color so pointedly described by James Weldon Johnson when relating a black man's experience of being let down by the white woman he loves after confiding his passing: “My situation made me feel weak and powerless, like a man trying with his bare hands to break the iron bars of his prison cell” (140). According to the second of these two cultural templates, incarceration correlates, at least to some extent, with skin color. While this aspect of incarceration is of course central to the historical institution of slavery and its narratives, it is also central to today's criminal justice system. As a recent report found, thirty-eight percent of prison and jail inmates are African American, compared to their

thirteen percent share of the overall population (“Reducing Racial Disparity” 2). These rates imply that a black male born in 2001 has a thirty-two percent chance of spending time in prison at some point in his life, a Hispanic male has a seventeen percent chance, and a white male has a six percent chance.

One pertinent way of understanding this racial disparity within the criminal justice system is to look at it as an example of structural racism—that is, the longstanding differential treatment of people of color. In this vein, sociologist Loïc Wacquant suggests we understand the contemporary American prison system to be the latest in a sequence of institutions whose purpose it has been to define, confine, and control black Americans. Wacquant lists four such institutions, namely slavery, Jim Crow, the urban ghetto, and finally the contemporary United States prison system. The institutional nexus in this fourth arrangement of racial dominance is a combination of material and symbolic containment of people of color, Wacquant notes. Materially, black offenders are contained by draconian penalty laws.² Symbolically, Wacquant argues, the current paradigm of law and order has succeeded in strengthening the old American association of blackness with criminality. Thus, criminal offenders currently figure culturally not merely as some sort of monster, but more specifically as a black monster: “Throughout the urban criminal justice system, the formula ‘Young + Black + Male’ is now openly equated with ‘probable cause’ justifying the arrest, questioning, bodily search and detention of millions of African-American males every year” (Wacquant 104). In this light, Wacquant indicts the current mass imprisonment for its symbolical production of race. He posits that prison has become a “preeminent institution for signifying and enforcing blackness, much as slavery was during the first three centuries of US history” (106).

In this article I examine the configuration of prison and race in two contemporary American novels: Walter Mosley's *The Man in My Basement* and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*. The reason for the detour, by way of introduction, to the various meanings of the term neo-slave narrative is to suggest that the imaginary of imprisonment presented by these novels has a significant history in African American literature. In my engagement with the ramifications of the prison motif in the novels, I use the terms *color prison* and *colored prison* in order to summarize the two frameworks alluded to above: firstly, the notion of color being a form of confinement, and secondly, the notion of confinement being racially conditioned. Both novels investigate racial themes by exploring the motif of prison. A complex relation between a black and a white man is central to both *The Man in My Basement* and *The Fortress of Solitude*—these relations unfolding across real and imaginary prison walls. In their interpretation of the intersections of prison and race, Mosley and Lethem make use of several tropes central to the literatures of neo-slavery and to the black American literary canon in general, tropes such as flight, escape, invisibility, and passing. Furthermore, the novels share the setting of an urban, segregated New York City, depicted in both *The Man in My Basement* and *The Fortress of Solitude* as a city under the spell of rigid social and ethnic divisions.

In his collection of essays *Workin' on The Chain Gang*, Walter Mosley suggests that white America is currently and increasingly becoming familiar with experiences of isolation, alienation, emptiness, and unfreedom, in ways that have traditionally characterized primarily minorities in the United States. Thus, the chains restraining the contemporary American “might be more recognizable in the black experience, but they restrain us all,”

Mosley writes (*Workin'* 15). What we may think of as African American conditions can no longer be isolated from white American experience, and we ought therefore to refrain from marginalizing the history of blacks: "Blacks are too often shown as anomalous victims in an otherwise brilliant and positive pageant of democracy and Yankee know-how," but, according to Mosley, black American history is American history, and it cannot be separated from a supposedly general white American history (46).

In what follows, my suggestion will be that such shared experience of unfreedom is what is at stake in both *The Man in My Basement* and *The Fortress of Solitude*. What I am offering is not exactly an interpretation of these two novels as literary artworks, but rather an exploration of the ways in which the novels themselves interpret this shared restraint pointed out by Mosley. In their depiction of contemporary United States society, the color line made tangible by W. E. B. Du Bois still cuts through the nation at all levels of the social, insofar as both novels are explicitly concerned with the real differences marking the lives of white Americans and people of color. Yet, both novels are also engaged in interpreting a certain spillover effect from real and imaginary prisons. More precisely, I will suggest, Walter Mosley and Jonathan Lethem make use of the prison motif in order to draw our attention to the social impossibility of containing the racialized experience of containment—or in the words of Mosley, the impossibility of extricating "the black experience in America from the larger American experience" (*Workin'* 10). The first part of my article examines two prominent themes of *The Man in My Basement*, namely that of racialized spectatorship and a certain figurative combination of two types of slavery. In the final part, I examine the ways in which *The Fortress of Solitude* can be said to "appropriate" the cultural templates *color prison* and *colored prison*, making them relevant in a "white" literary frame work.

Prison in the Expanded Field

On the face of it, Walter Mosley's *The Man in My Basement* has very little to do with the US prison system as such. The main character in the novel and its narrator, Charles Dodd-Blakey, lives alone in his childhood home in the village of Sag Harbor, Long Island. He leads a quiet, slow life working as a cashier in a local bank, a job from which he is at some point laid off for pocketing small change. One day Anniston Bennet, a white, wealthy man, knocks on Charles's door offering him an awful lot of money in return for renting his basement for a few months. When Charles finally accepts, Bennet sees to it that a cell is installed in the basement of Charles's house and demands that Charles be his private prison guard for a couple of months. What Bennet wants is to pay for what he describes as "crimes against humanity." The claustrophobic narrative unfolds primarily in the basement of Charles's house, where the prisoner and his guard discuss the meaning of notions such as crime, punishment, and responsibility. The circumstances of this instance of confinement are entirely unlike the conditions of real life prisons. Here, the prisoner is a very wealthy man whose punishment is self-imposed and thus just as extra-legal as the misdeeds he wishes to atone for. Clearly, then, Mosley has not attempted a realistic depiction of the contemporary US prison system. Rather, the novel interprets aspects of

imprisonment not readily visible or comprehensible, when facing the prison in its common form. What seems to have caught Mosley's attention is some dark, subterranean quality of prison life in America. In a sense, the prison in the basement is a phantasmatic prison, not because something in the narrative suggests it to be a product of Charles's fantasy alone, but rather because it lends itself, by way of multiple associations, to a portrait of the US prison in a phantasmatically expanded version.

The basement prison clearly serves as a means of restricting something that—in the world of the novel—does not otherwise meet restrictions, namely a global finance capitalism based on slave-like labor and corruption. In his confessions to Charles, Bennet paints a gloomy picture of a world order in which raw capitalism and exploitation is subject to no rule of law. He has, Bennet confesses, "reclaimed" everything from diamonds to political prisoners, human organs, and newborn babies:

I once gave a nine-month-old infant as a present to a man's dog. The man wanted to see if the myth of wolves raising men could be true. I walked through a city of the dead, in Rwanda, guarded by soldiers who were paid in dollars. . . . I retrieved enough money in diamonds to rebuild a nation, but instead I took those jewels and put them in a titanium box in the Alps. (Mosley, *The Man* 215)

The figure of the global poor symbolized by the suffering of African people looms large in the novel as a means of contrasting and relating affluent living to lives not recognized as worth living. Bennet knows a man doing the same kind of reclamation work as Bennet himself: "He says he won't kill in this country or Europe," Bennet says of this acquaintance of his, "but life down south is open season for him" (214). Apparently, Bennet's services are in great demand by governments all over the world, but they are, simultaneously, absolutely private to the extent that they are beyond any notion of a public sphere. As Bennet says of his ghostly yet consequential movements on this back stage of global politics:

With a word from me, your life could end. Maybe just with a gesture. A sentence could level a city block or blow a jetliner out of the sky. A dream could destroy Philadelphia. A disagreement could throw western Africa into famine for five years. You see it every day on TV, but no one listens. People like me move around, but no one knows our names. (233)

On this dark side of politics, systems of rewarding and punishing differ dramatically from the ones in Charles's world, in which you are laid off for having your fingers in the till. The provisional prison in the basement is thus Bennet's attempt to subject himself to some sort of moral and social control, since no ordinary juridical arrangements recognize his crimes *as* crimes. According to this logic, Bennet's prison is a basement prison, or private prison as it is referred to by both prisoner and guard, because the crimes atoned here are themselves publicly invisible and subterranean.

The historical institution of slavery in America is an important context for the basement prison and thus for the novel's condemning portrayal of the cultural logic of global capitalism and the neo-slavery it reportedly depends upon. In order to make room for the

modern cell construction, Charles must rid the basement of stuff from before the Civil War, handed down in his family for generations, and it turns out that the furniture, clothes, and paintings have great value as collectibles. Through this intervention of old stuff in his life Charles becomes interested in the history of his ancestors, and by the end of the novel Charles runs a museum for African American local history in his childhood home. As far as Charles knows, none of his ancestors were slaves, but clearing out the dusty basement makes him reflect on his own history in an unprecedented way. The imagined freedom of his forefathers had been a source of pride to his parents, Charles remembers: "The only time I had ever seen my father get angry was when Clarence's father once asked him, 'How can you be sure that one'a them Blakeys you so proud of wasn't a slave at one time or other?'" (Mosley, *The Man* 17). Likewise, Charles remembers that his relatives preferred comparing themselves to the British and Irish immigrants rather than to "the mass of blacks in this country" (125). Nevertheless, his late uncle Brent kept calling the roots of the family into question:

He said that we were like all other American blacks, that we came from "slave-caliber Negroes who were defeated in war and sold into slavery because they didn't have the guts to die in battle." He said that there was no such thing as free Africans who had "chosen to come over and sell their labor in indentured servitude" and that American Negro citizens never existed before 1865, as my father claimed. (30)

No matter how things were, Charles laconically notes, racism has little if anything to do with pedigree and everything to do with skin color (125).

The basement prison is linked by association to the time preceding the Civil War not only because Bennet and his cell take possession of the space in which Charles's antecedents used to reside and in which the past shall again resume its prominent and museological position by the end of the novel. The private prison is also linked to African American history, because Bennet brings with him an original metal lock used to restrain slaves on the old slave ships, fastening the lock to the new cell construction. Upon opening and closing the cell door in order to feed his prisoner, Charles has to maneuver the old slave lock. To Bennet it was important to find a suitable basement in the house of a black American, and the extra-legal atonement he has planned seems in several ways to be dependent on the presence of an African American, specifically: "I'm supposed to be down here. Trapped by a Negro, a black man, until the bubble in my brain passes. Until the itch in my heart goes away" (Mosley, *The Man* 237). When Charles wants to know the reason why Bennet chose *his* home for a prison, the following exchange unfolds between the two:

"There's lots of reclamations in Africa, Charles. Diamonds and oil, slave labor to cobble tennis shoes and assemble fancy lamps. They have armies over there who will strip down to the waist and go hand to hand with bayonets and clubs. They have tribal factions and colonizers. The streets, in short, are paved with gold."

"My house isn't Africa."

"But you are a black man. You come from over there. I need a black face to look in on me. No white man has the right." (174)

According to this peculiar logic, Bennet deserves to be confined in the basement of an African American because he has exploited the rich opportunities on the African continent to hire mercenaries and "slave labor." Bennet's way of paying back his debts to humanity is thus based on a conception of geographically and historically stretched out collective systems of guilt and reconciliation, according to which it makes sense to be punished by someone whose ancestors arrived from Africa several generations prior to the crimes in question committed in contemporary Africa.

In Charles's basement in Sag Harbor, two versions of slavery, or *colored prison*, thus intersect: The historical institution of slavery in America *and* a neo-slavery driven by a deadly economic order Charles knew nothing about prior to Bennet's self-imposed confinement. The basement prison is thus a literary vehicle for connecting Bennet's "crimes against humanity" to a time in which a systematic exploitation of people of color took place not on a far continent but within the confines of the nation. The figure of the slave and the figure of the global poor are intertwined in a way that likens slavery to the type of exchange between north and south, between affluent societies and worthless human lives, which Bennet now wants to punish himself for serving all these years. In other words, the private, cellarly prison in Sag Harbor operates as a literary stapling of a new and an old slavery, and it is in light of this stitching together of past and present modes of exploitation that we are to understand Charles's description of Bennet as "a slaver of souls in the twentieth century" and a "a torturer of black people" (Mosley, *The Man* 234). Although Charles now and then punishes Bennet by not turning on the light in the basement or not serving his prisoner food for several days, he does not hate Bennet, nor does he want to add to the punishment of the imprisonment itself. Rather, what Charles wants is to disturb a certain power relation: "I didn't want to be another one of his slaves," as Charles thinks to himself (235).

As an institutional model for this analogy between the exploitative capitalism described by Bennet and the historical institution of slavery alluded to repeatedly, Mosley has chosen the prison. Looking in on his prisoner through the bars of the cell, Charles even associates Bennet with the imprisoned martyrs of the real world: "He was like one of those death-row inmates that they interview just before the sentence is executed. You see all the evil that they caused, but you still feel like death is not the answer—that killing this man would in some strange way take away his victims' last hope" (Mosley, *The Man* 173). At one point Charles looks at the cell and decides that "the structure might bear more than a resemblance to a prison cell" (119). The cell in the basement does not merely look like a prison cell, it *more than looks like* a prison cell. It is exactly this peculiar more-than-resemblance that forms the novel's interpretation of the American prison system and its intangible qualities. The basement prison is a prison within the United States and thus an American prison. However, it is an expanded and amplified version of the American prison, since the novel interprets the subterranean quality of the prison to be a function of stitching together new and old forms of slavery. In this sense, the basement prison is a displacement of the US prison system onto a phantasmatic terrain, in which an otherwise disavowed quality of this system is made available for reflection.

As I mentioned earlier, Brian Jarvis has described prison literature by black Americans as neo-slave narratives. According to Jarvis, this prison literature shares with the original slave narratives an ambivalent idea of captivity. "Despite the aspirations of their guardians,

neither the plantation nor the prison-industrial complex has functioned as total institutions. In fact, these punitive zones have often been the site of self-empowerment by their captives through political education and expression," Jarvis writes (122). In *The Man in My Basement* Walter Mosley has made use of this tradition for representing a colored prison as an occasion for consciousness-raising and education. Thus, for Charles the prison in his basement brings about exactly such a sense of "self-empowerment" and "political education" described by Jarvis. The basement prison, and the political reality it silently comments on, impart to Charles an entirely new understanding of the world and the life he inhabits: "I believed that Bennet knew the truth that lay under the newspaper stories and the hypocrisy of politics. He made me question what was, when for a whole lifetime up till that moment, I accepted the world's excuses" (Mosley, *The Man* 154). The encounter with this powerful underground man awakens a new political interest in Charles, and in this sense Bennet becomes his tutor. From being a rather lethargic escapist at the outset of the novel, Charles changes, through the relation to his prisoner, into a historically and politically aware museum inspector.

Somewhat at odds with the typical distribution of roles in the African American tradition for transforming prisons into zones of possibilities, Charles's education does not, however, stem from being imprisoned himself, but rather from being, as he says, a tool for Bennet's penance. Compared to the tradition sketched by Jarvis, the roles are switched and this is, in fact, characteristic for the way the novel adapts and rearranges notions of both color prisons and colored prisons. In the world of *The Man in My Basement*, being black in contemporary America is not the same as being innocent in relation to the conditions of neo-slavery, the rough contours of which are sketched out in the novel. Significantly, Charles's heightened political awareness has not primarily to do with the marginalization of blacks in America today. Rather, what Charles realizes is a certain form of human worthlessness showing its signs across time and space. So when Charles condemns Bennet and his cruel actions, Bennet returns the critique saying things like: "You think that you can have the easy life of TV and gasoline without someone suffering and dying somewhere?" (240). Bennet repeatedly points to the question of the possible responsibility of Americans for the suffering of others: "Did you kill the Kurds in Iraq? Was Roosevelt guilty of the gassing of the Jews because he refused to bomb the camps or the rails leading to them?" (151). Charles's political recognitions are based primarily on this type of discussion about the global scopes of responsibility. In this way, the human worthlessness found by the narrative to be a common denominator of two versions of slavery is made pertinent to Charles and his way of life.

Radical Resignation

As Gayle Wald has shown, literary and other narratives of passing typically involve an equivocal idea of the import of race and ethnicity. On the one hand, narratives of passing suggest that whites enjoy all sorts of exclusive privileges in society, not least the privilege of neutrality. On the other hand, a successful passing also indicates that whiteness and its privileges can be appropriated by people otherwise considered non-whites. Thus, in nar-

ratives of passing race figures as something having the authority to define an individual and assign to him or her a particular position in the racialized social order of things, yet this racial definition simultaneously figures as something available for appropriation. In *The Man in My Basement*, Mosley tells a story of passing in a rather unfamiliar framing. Bennet, the underground man, is in a sense discolored. As he confesses to Charles, his mother being Greek and his father probably Turkish, Bennet himself merely *passes* for white by wearing ice blue lenses and by erasing his black hair entirely with electrolysis: "When I grew up I named myself. I didn't know a thing about either parent or their cultures," Bennet says. "I was here and I meant to thrive. I created a whole history based on the name Bennet" (Mosley, *The Man* 195). Passing, we would think, is attractive only to the extent that skin color still connotes either freedom or confinement, and in this peculiar story about neo-slavery freedom is still an attribute of whiteness as it was the case in the classical narratives of passing told by writers such as Frederick Douglass, James Weldon Johnson, and Nella Larsen. Charles reacts with dismay at Bennet's testimony of passing revealing precisely this idea of skin color connoting either freedom or prison, either human worth or worthlessness: "You're passing as blue blood," Charles exclaims. "But you're really nothing. You don't even know if your father was Turkish. He could have been Arab or even African" (195). Being black in America today is not the same as being innocent in relation to ideologies of racism, the novel seems to suggest.

Charles's own way of dealing with racial markers such as skin color is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, Charles is trying to open up the rigid racial category of blackness. As the first-person narrator of the novel Charles is particularly careful in his classification of other black characters who are identified without exception according to a finely tuned color scale going from "tan-colored," "auburn," "coffee-and-cream," "dark brown," "dark amber," to "black as tar." On the other hand, representing the experience of racialized spectatorship, Mosley has simultaneously radicalized a literary tradition of resignation with prominent representatives such as Ralph Ellison and Frantz Fanon. Especially noteworthy in this regard is Charles's careless or depressed acceptance of an apparently abysmal chasm between black and white folks. "I knew that many white people didn't like me because of my dark skin," Charles notes at one point. "I wasn't stupid" (Mosley, *The Man* 125). Frantz Fanon's classical and oft-cited description in *Black Skin, White Masks* of a black man's traumatizing experience of a white boy being frightened by the sight of him and his blackness shall here serve as an example of altogether different levels of agitation and sorrow than what Charles can muster. "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" the black man in *Black Skin, White Masks* overhears the boy crying out, "the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up" (Fanon 114). To the main character in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the experience of being fixated by the white gaze is so claustrophobic that he perceives white people in general as: "the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me" (112). In contrast to this intensity of feeling in the voice of the narrator of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles's parallel experience of causing fear among white people is represented as something he is indifferent to, as a matter of course. In general, Charles just shruggingly notes that he probably seems ominous to the white people in the community of Sag Harbor. Upon meeting a white neighbor in the dark on the station, Charles reflects:

Trudy, the mother, looked at me nervously, a black man at midnight and the train not in yet. "Hello, Mrs. Benoit," I hailed. "You meeting Raoul?" I said it to put her at ease. It worked too. She smiled and nodded. She didn't remember my name. Maybe she couldn't distinguish between black men. But it didn't matter what white people saw when they looked at me. Why would I care? (Mosley, *The Man* 144)

In the literary works by Fanon and Ellison black people also resign when confronted with appearing, in the eyes of their white surroundings, alternately invisible, hyper-visible, and just plain threatening. But whereas resignation in this tradition is always a disappointed, despairing, and desperate countermove to a deeply felt expectation of and claim to racial justice, Charles's resignation is of the politically depressed kind. In this light, *The Man in My Basement* presents us with a historically intensified resignation regarding American color lines.

Escaping Whiteness

As we have seen, an original slave lock fastened to a new cell made tangible the analogy between old and new systems of slavery and incarceration established in *The Man in My Basement*. In *The Fortress of Solitude* Jonathan Lethem does not in a similar way draw analogies across history, but the novel emphasizes the ways in which discrimination, ghettoization, and incarceration give rise to limitations for both black and white Americans. A couple of years prior to *The Fortress of Solitude* becoming a bestseller, Lethem wrote a preface to the 1967 classical prison novel by Malcolm Braly, *On the Yard*. Here, Lethem praised Braly for not simplifying prison life and for moving between the particular and the universal by using life in prison as "a model for understanding aspects of our self-wardened lives." Contrary to other prison novels, Lethem wrote, Braly avoids depicting life in prison as "cartoons of black-and-white morality, having nothing to do with the rest of us—we who live in the modulated, ambivalent, civilized world 'the novel' was born to depict" (Lethem, Introduction vii). In this vein, Lethem's own novel also reads as an interpretation of what prison has to do with "the rest of us."

In *The Fortress of Solitude* Lethem has displaced the common notion of skin color as a form of prison to the perspective of a white boy. In the first, long part of the novel we are made familiar, by the third-person narrator, with life in 1970s Brooklyn as it is led by the boy Dylan Ebdus. Dylan is a thoughtfully observant kid, who like all kids longs to be just like the others, which in Dylan's world means being black—his best friend Mingus being a black boy his age. The Ebdus family is one of the few white families in their neighborhood, and Dylan thus grows up as an odd, white minority in a black community. In Brooklyn, Dylan is a poor *whiteboy* and an easy target for friendly blackmailing and ordinary bullying. When attempting to sneak unnoticed past a group of boys Dylan lets the hood of his parka cover his white face and buries his white hands deep in his pocket grateful for winter at least providing an occasion for masking all that whiteness. We may think of Dylan's thorough masking as an instance of passing: in the Brooklyn of the novel, Dylan

is off-color trying to pass not exactly as black but as socially invisible. When Dylan does not succeed in being either invisible or ignored, and a couple of boys ever so discretely *yoke* him, kindly asking for a dollar or two, Dylan accepts his destiny without a word and pays up. He frequently ends up "caged on street corners, stranded anywhere. A pair of kids made a human jail" (Lethem, *Fortress* 84). In this particular sense, the slave lock and the yoke around Dylan's neck are elements in a highly asymmetrical, yet shared, history of color and prisons.

As a teenager, Dylan thinks of Brooklyn itself as a prison with a black prison population, in which he is mistakenly held captive. While saving up for his escape to the fine, white Cambden College, Dylan repeats his mantra: "Not In Jail, Just Visiting" (Lethem, *Fortress* 239). With this theme of escaping a colored prison (and a color prison), Lethem makes use of a central feature of the African American literary canon. In the historical slave narratives as well as in the various versions of a neo-slave literature, escape from colored prisons is a theme so common that literary scholar Elisabeth Ford has aptly coined the term "escapee tradition" for central works in black American literary history.³ As representative of this tradition Ford mentions among other novels Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and *Song of Solomon* is worth considering also in this context, since the fleeing persons in both Morrison's and Lethem's novels use the same means of transport, namely flying. In Morrison's novel the ability to fly is one of few possibilities for the African American characters to escape. With this specific motif, Morrison establishes a relation between, on the one hand, an emancipated slave of whom we learn that he one day simply took off from the roof of a church and flew back to Africa, and on the other hand the main character, Milkman, who by the end of the novel finally realizes that he also has the ability to fly. In the last sentence of the novel Milkman realizes that if "you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (Morrison 337).

In the literary arrangement of *Song of Solomon*, the motif of flying is a magic countermove to the long history of material and symbolic incarceration shared by the black characters. Likewise, flying amounts to more than leisure for Dylan and Mingus in *The Fortress of Solitude*. Upon being given a magic ring by a homeless black man, Dylan and Mingus regularly transform into a flying team that they call Aeroman, flying providing a means for the two of them to assault their respective prisons. For Dylan, Aeroman provides an escape from his color prison by hunting down the boys yoking him—that is, the black kids regularly making up the "human jails" of Dylan's life as a *whiteboy* in Brooklyn. Conversely, as ring bearer Mingus uses the ability of flight to make visible a local landmark, Brooklyn House of Detention, sketching his tag, Dose, at the top of the 26-floor tower of the jail: "The Tag was a cry, a claim, an undeniable thing. The looming jail which no one mentioned or looked at and the trail of dripping paint that covered the city's every public surface and which no one mentioned or looked at: two invisible things had rendered one another visible, at least for one day" (Lethem, *Fortress* 272). Thus, unlike the flying Solomon in Morrison's novel, Mingus does not take off for Africa, but instead points out the most significant institutional threat to his freedom. His signature on the detention house constitutes a solemn demand for his surroundings to recognize this place through which the boys of the neighborhood in a near future shall pass in large numbers on their way to other destinations within the prison system. Aeroman and the magic ring are in other words means by which Dylan and Mingus confront the real and imagined prisons in their lives.

However, the novel does not merely represent the ghetto as an imagined prison, because in *The Fortress of Solitude* the American prison at the end of the twentieth century is also a kind of transplanted ghetto. More precisely, what the novel explores and unfolds is a transition between ghetto and prison akin to the one analyzed by sociologist Loïc Wacquant. According to Wacquant's analysis, during the 1970s the US prison system assumed the workings that had for years been assigned to the ghetto, namely a combined material and symbolic containment of African Americans. In the second half of the twentieth century, prisons were transformed in the image of the ghetto, Wacquant argues, and thus, insofar as today's prison mirrors the black ghettos of the 1950s and 1960s, it is partly because entire communities are moved back and forth between prison and ghetto: "An overwhelming majority of its [the prison's] occupants originate from the racialized core of the country's major cities, and returns [sic] there upon release, only to be soon caught again in the police dragnet to be sent away for another, longer sojourn behind bars in a self-perpetuating cycle of escalating, socioeconomic marginality and legal incapacitation" (101). In *The Fortress of Solitude* Mingus embodies this movement between prison and Brooklyn, and through the portrait of Mingus's nomadic and addict life, the reader gets a rough sense of the developments in the prison system in New York during the 1980s and 1990s. While Mingus is doing time, he has the odd experience of his old neighborhood joining him on the inside, "as though the system was inadvertently reassembling the city and its factions here" (Lethem, *Fortress* 482). As kids Dylan and Mingus think of Brooklyn as their prison, but this metaphor is realized in the novel as lived experience in so far as the prison itself is turned into a displaced ghetto. In other words, the connection drawn by the novel between ghetto and prison is not merely figurative, but also conceptual.

The Literary Color Prison

Throughout *The Fortress of Solitude* Lethem works with the theme of representation and appropriation, a theme that is, however, particularly conspicuous in the last two parts of the novel, "Liner Notes" and "Prisonaires." Since the early 1980s, when Dylan finally managed to escape Brooklyn and Mingus received his first prison sentence, Dylan has grown up to become a music critic specializing in soul music from the 1960s and 1970s, an expert nerd constantly referring to bits and pieces of an African American canon of songs. Thus, the novel here portrays a white critic and his work on black music culture. At one point, Dylan writes a sample of liner notes for a distinct re-release, the notes in his own mind close to being the best piece he's ever written. His editor, however, is not impressed. He thinks the text amounts to an assertion of black history of music and predicts that Dylan will win a Grammy for "best hot air" (Lethem, *Fortress* 337). Through this criticism the novel self-referentially names its own representational challenges: how to represent black cultural history in a "white narrative"; how to avoid making assertions of "the other"; how to depict the conditions of black Americans today without creating simplistic and sentimental stereotypes. By having his editor doubting Dylan's ability to represent African American culture, *The Fortress of Solitude* raises the question of cultural appropriation.

In his book *Neo-slave Narratives*, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy discusses the ways in which William Styron, in his controversial neo-slave narrative *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), at once mobilized the neo-slave narrative as literary genre and caused much debate among African American intellectuals about white America's appropriation and possible abuse of the social position and voice of slaves. This debate, Rushdy points out, was about "the voice of the novelist who would represent the slave; not only what the representation of slavery would be like, but who would do the representing. The issue was cultural appropriation" (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 92). According to Rushdy, one of the aspects of Styron's literary representation of Nat Turner that seemed problematic to the debaters was the ostensible stereotypical depiction of the rebel as a rather infantile and compliant character. By making Turner himself subject to literary paternalism Styron reproduced, according to his critics, the racial ideology of the South. Unintentionally, his literary project could be said to be in keeping with "a social project in which African American culture is both appropriated and denied its history," Rushdy writes (55).

On the one hand, the African American characters in *The Fortress of Solitude* are rather stereotypical. They appear both romanticized and tragic in their manifestation of fascinating beauty and misery, and Lethem has not made the task any easier for himself by writing about young black men at odds with the law. On the other hand, Lethem seems to be fully aware of the type of critique launched at William Styron and his literary descendants. In the final part of the novel, "Prisonaires," there is yet another example of the novel's explicit framing of the question of appropriation. Prisonaires is the name of a historical vocal group popular in the 1950s during a time in which all of them happened to be doing time. Hoping to get funding for a film project about this particular group, Dylan relates their incredible story to some big shot producer in Hollywood. As Dylan tells it, it's a tragic story about purely innocent black men, "victims of prejudice and economic injustice in the Jim Crow South" (325), and so when finally grasping the huge melodramatic potential of the story, the producer is all for securing the rights to the story. Through Dylan's pitch *The Fortress of Solitude* characterizes a film industry according to which every narrative of racism must be told as a melodrama revolving around innocent and tragic black men and women. But the scene in the producer's office is also a means for Lethem to thematically put his own representational challenges on the novel's agenda.

This theme of representation and appropriation has a formal side to it in *The Fortress of Solitude*. By switching narrators now and then, the novel reads like a literary test site for various ways of representing African American characters that are not merely occasions for reflecting sweeping moral dilemmas. It thus seems as if Lethem explicitly tests his own way of representing black and white while simultaneously allowing his reader to recognize the challenges. In most of this last part of the novel Dylan is narrating in the first-person, but the narrative makes it clear that although it means the world to him, Dylan is not necessarily a well-qualified mediator of African American culture. Accordingly, Dylan is replaced by another narrator in some parts of "Prisonaires," and so instead of Dylan narrating in first-person, we suddenly listen to a third-person narrator who is able to slide in and out of Mingus's point of view. With this switch of narrators, the layout of the text also changes. Now, shorter passages are given headings pointing to the content of the specific passage, and frequently the heading simply states the name of the prison in which Mingus is serving his most recent sentence. This formal rearrangement gives this part of the novel,

which is about the long prison odyssey of Mingus, an altogether different feel of historical report than the rather oversensitive narration of Dylan. Furthermore, in this report-like part of the novel, Mingus is not even called Mingus, but appears under his tag name, Dose. In this way, the narrative itself suggests that a responsive representation of Mingus's life and encounter with the prison system is dependent upon a deterritorialization, so to speak, of the formal premises of the novel. Another voice, another style, another format.

As I have been using the term, *colored prison* designates the common notion of certain forms of imprisonment being racially organized. Conversely, by *color prison* I have wished to name the idea of race and skin color itself amounting to a form of imprisonment. In *The Fortress of Solitude* Lethem has these complementary frameworks complicating each other by making visible the novel's own color prison. The various examples of colored prisons are central to the novel: the Brooklyn ghetto referred to as a prison; Mingus's long prison life among black brothers; and the incarcerated vocal group, The Prisonaires. And in its way of thematically and formally framing these instances of colored prisons, *The Fortress of Solitude* points to its own representational restraints. The notion of color amounting to a form of confinement is in this way realized as a formal model for the novel, which at the same time volunteers as a literary test site for ways of escaping this particular literary prison. When Dylan finally, after twenty years without any contact between the two of them, pays Mingus a visit in a correctional facility in Watertown, he plans to give Mingus the magic ring in order to use its magic gifts to escape the facility. Since they last met the ring has changed its powers, no longer giving the ring bearer the ability to fly, but to be invisible. However, Mingus refuses to accept the ring and the plans for flight. When Dylan insists, saying "[y]ou could use it to break out of this place," Mingus spurns his offer: "You couldn't even use that thing to break into this place" (Lethem, *Fortress* 444). After this encounter with Mingus in Watertown, Dylan realizes that the real challenge of prison is not so much breaking out, but, on the contrary, breaking in: "I needed to go behind the walls. My first pass at the prison had been too cursory, a tourist's, as ever. I had to earn Mingus's escape with my own willingness to go inside, to show how it could be done (447).

That, I would suggest, is the principal recognition in Lethem's novel, that confinement not only keeps "them" on the inside, but also keeps "us" on the outside. In my understanding of *The Man in My Basement* and *The Fortress of Solitude* both Mosley and Lethem use the particular configurations of the prison motif within the African American literary tradition in order to broaden the imagination of the affective, social, and material implications of incarceration in America. In these novels there is no undamaged outside to the prison system, just as racism and discrimination in general seem to leave no communities unaffected. In both novels the prison motif is remarkable, precisely to the extent that prison here constitutes a space with damning effects on all of its sides. The prisons rub off on their exterior, so to speak, and both *The Man in My Basement* and *The Fortress of Solitude* express this rubbing-off, this social sharedness of prison existence, by reconfiguring the prison imagery they employ. By renewing and expanding the cultural imaginary of prison and race, they contribute to making new aspects of American prison reality accessible for reflection.

NOTES

1. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy thus defines the genre like this: "Having fictional slave characters as narrators, subjects, or ancestral presences, the neo-slave narratives' major unifying feature is that they represent slavery as a historical phenomenon that has lasting cultural meaning and enduring social consequences" ("Neo-Slave Narrative" 533). Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu uses the term much the same way, as does Sterling Lecater Bland when describing novels such as Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1989) as neo-slave narratives (Bland 20).
2. In their report, Marc Mauer and Ryan S. King state that "African Americans serve almost as much time in federal prison for a drug offense (58.7 months) as whites do for a violent offense (61.7 months), largely due to racially disparate sentencing laws such as the 100-to-1 crack-powder cocaine disparity" (2).
3. Ford elaborates the notion of an *escapee tradition* in her essay, in which she writes:

If white America had the frontier, with its promise of open space and untrammelled freedom, black American literature defined its own frontier, across which lay a promised land of available jobs, safe neighborhoods, and decent housing. The impulse to "get away" in slave narratives, and their descendants has thus consistently been linked to an ethic of self-improvement and community betterment. (1077)

WORKS CITED

- Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Bell, Bernard W. *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2004.
- Bland, Sterling Lecater, ed. *African American Slave Narratives*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Douglass, Frederick. *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. 1845. New York: Penguin, 1987.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- Ford, Elisabeth V. "Miscounts, Loopholes, and Flashbacks." *Callaloo* 28.4 (2005): 1074–1090.
- Jarvis, Brian. *Cruel and Unusual: Punishment and US Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 2004.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Auto-biography of an Ex-Colored Man*. 1912. New York: Pelican, 1948.
- Lethem, Jonathan. *The Fortress of Solitude*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.
- . Introduction. *On the Yard*. By Malcolm Braly. New York: New York Review Books, 2002. v–xi.
- Mauer, Marc. *Race to Incarcerate*. New York: The New Press, 2006.
- Mauer, Marc, and Ryan S. King. "A 25-Year Quagmire: The War on Drugs and Its Impact on American Society." *The Sentencing Project*. 2007. Web. 22 Apr. 2014. <http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/dp_25yearquagmire.pdf>
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987.
- . *Song of Solomon*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1978.
- Mosley, Walter. *The Man in My Basement*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005.
- . *Workin' on the Chain Gang: Shaking off the Dead Hand of History*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006.
- "Reducing Racial Disparity in the Criminal Justice System: A Manual for Practitioners and Policymakers." *The Sentencing Project*. 2008. Web. <http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/rd_reducingracialdisparity.pdf>
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. "Neo-Slave Narrative." *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. Ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.
- . *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Wacquant, Loïc. "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh." *Mass Imprisonment: Social Causes and Consequences*. Ed. David Garland. London: Sage Publications, 2001. 82–120.
- Wald, Gayle. *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
- Wideman, John Edgar. Introduction. *Live from Death Row*. By Mumia Abu-Jamal. 1995. New York: HarperCollins, 2002. xxiii–xxiv.